

# Green Bay's hidden graveyard

La Baye Burial Place beneath Adams Street is final resting place for city's early settlers

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Beneath the streets of downtown Green Bay lay the unmarked graves of the city's early settlers. Names like Grignon and de Langlade, along with unknown pioneers, were originally buried in what commonly is referred to as "La Baye Burial Place."

The former graveyard dates back to the 1740s — if not earlier — when this area was known as La Baye, named by French settlers in the 17th century.

While other local cemeteries would last generations, this graveyard eventually would be abandoned and erased from city maps. Despite the removal of bodies over the years, the site still remains the final resting place for some.

Although no remnants of the graveyard can be seen today, the site's location can be identified from early accounts. A Feb. 11, 1910 article in the Green Bay Gazette by Rev. J.J. Holzknacht, O.S.F., places it "on Washington Street on the site of Astor engine house, six lots of said block." A map of the town of Astor attributed to Arthur C. Neville, a former mayor of Green Bay and local historian, visually placed the graveyard.

La Baye Burial Place was shown as a nearly one block long plot directly over present-day South Adams Street, between Crooks and Chicago Streets. The graveyard partially extended east and west into what is now private property along Adams Street, immediately south of Captain's Walk Winery.

The map accompanied Neville's Feb. 15, 1925 article, "The First Church and Cemetery in Green Bay," published in the Green Bay Historical Bulletin.

The article coincided with the installation of a plaque commemorating Green Bay's first Catholic church in 1823 and what was referred to as the "first Catholic Cemetery."

While the La Baye Burial Place was near what would be the city's first Catholic Church, the two were not always linked.

The burial ground was created 80 to 100 years earlier, and served the purpose of a burial ground for all the community's inhabitants.

It also is worth noting that the site is more appropriately referred to as a graveyard or burial place, rather than a cemetery. Cemeteries developed in the Victorian era as landscaped plots of land generally were found in the outskirts of town. Graveyards were purely functional, and were created simply as a repository for bodies — many times located within the city and near a church.

Next to the plaque, a worn granite boulder also commemorates the site — perhaps more accurately.

It reads, "La Baye, Burial Place, 1720-1835, Land Donated By, Domitelle de Langlade, Grignon Langevin." Domitelle was the daughter of Charles de Langlade, who is remembered as one of the most significant figures in early Green Bay and Wisconsin history.

Today, both markers can be found on a patch of grass at the convergence of South Washington and Adams Streets.

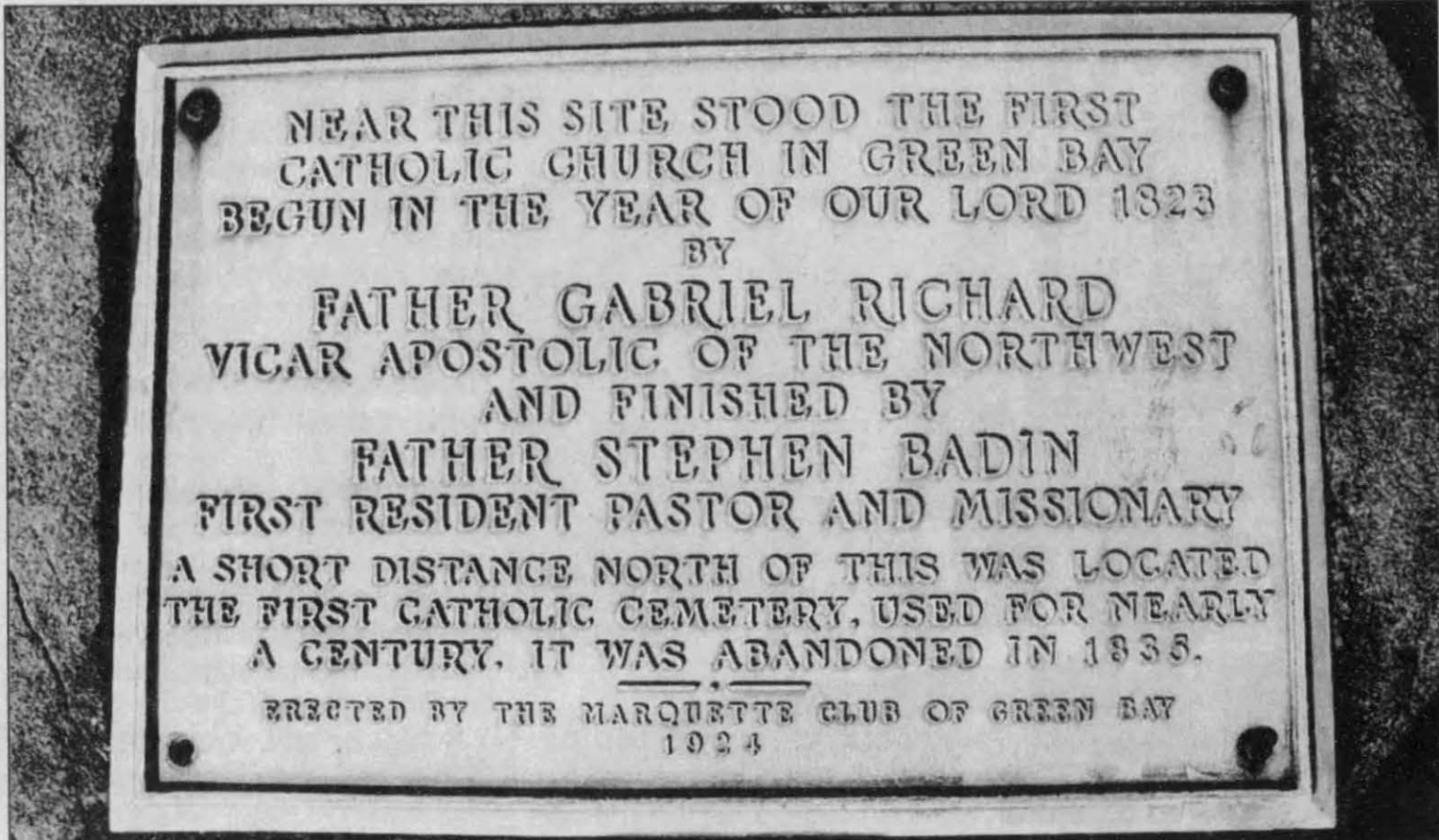
Starting in the 1720s to 1740s, the site would be the common burial ground for the community for roughly a century before finally being abandoned. Adorned with a white picket fence, it was nestled in the wilderness of the frontier community with little else in the vicinity.

The de Langlade and Pierre Grignon homes along the banks of the river were among the only other developed sites nearby. All else was woodland or the cedar swamp. Both French and English traders and settlers of La Baye would use the graveyard for burials.

Official records pertaining to the La Baye Burial Place are not known to exist. There are, however, numerous accounts over the past 200 years detailing its location and the individuals buried there.



A boulder with a plaque dated 1924 sits on the corner of Adams and Washington streets in Green Bay. The plaque marks the site of the first Catholic church in Green Bay and also mentions a graveyard just north of the spot that was abandoned in 1835. **Jim Matthews/Press-Gazette**



A close-up of the plaque. **Jim Matthews/Press-Gazette**



A close-up of the Langlade County Historical Society seal. It was designed by noted sculptor Sidney Bedore and bore an idealized likeness of his ancestor, Charles de Langlade. **Submitted**

General A. G. Ellis, who came to Green Bay in 1822, included the graveyard in his memoirs, "Fifty-years' Recollection of Wisconsin." Ellis placed the site in relation to a nearby home: "Just above this house of Pierre A. Grignon was the cemetery — picketed in, and under the control of the Catholics." He perhaps was alluding to the Catholic church, which was built directly south of the graveyard the following year.

In 1882, Elizabeth Baird, socialite and wife of a prominent Green Bay attorney, published her recollections of early Green Bay in the Gazette. She wrote that east of the Bank of Wisconsin Building "was the graveyard, taking in about a square. Graves were at one time underlying what is now Adams Street."

Many prominent names associated with early Green Bay were buried in the La Baye burial ground. This includes numerous members of the Grignon family, who were noted early settlers and fur traders: Augustin Grignon, who died in 1771; Pierre Grignon Sr. (1740-1795), along with his wife Domitelle de Langlade Grignon-Langevin, and son Pierre Jr., who both died in 1823; and Domitelle's mother, Charlotte Ambroisine Bourassa de Langlade, or "Madame de Langlade" (1735-1818).

Augustin de Langlade (1703-1777), a fur trader who, along with his family, became the first permanent European/Métis set-



Studio portrait of Augustin Grignon (1780-1860), a fur trader and settler in Green Bay, holding a tomahawk. The tomahawk was made from a gun barrel by the government blacksmith in Green Bay, and could be used as a pipe as well. **Submitted**

tlers in La Baye, was also interred there. His son Charles Michel de Langlade (1729-1802), known as the "first permanent European/Métis settler" in Wisconsin, was buried next to him. The younger de Langlade's death was remembered more than a half a century later by Augustin Grignon, who recalled in 1857: "The little colony at Green Bay went in a body to weep over his grave, which may still be seen in the old cemetery of the town."

The La Baye Burial Place would eventually fall victim to progress and growth. In 1835, the town of Astor was formed south of Walnut Street. After the platting of Astor, the once rural landscape slowly transformed into a young town with streets and land parcels carved out of the wilderness.

A majority of the old graveyard would be covered by Adams Street, which was extended south from Navarino, the town to the north. What remained was incorporated into adjoining parcels of land.

After the graveyard's closure, efforts were made to remove bodies to other locations. While many were disinterred and placed in mass graves elsewhere, others were left in place indefinitely.

Identification of the graves proved to be difficult. Most were



Father Stephen Badin was credited with "finishing" the first Catholic church in Green Bay, which was built next to the graveyard in 1823 — 12 years before La Baye Burial Place was abandoned. Badin was referred to as "The first resident pastor and missionary" in Green Bay. **Submitted**

marked with wooden crosses that had decayed over time. Descendants of persons buried in the graveyard somehow had to identify their relatives in order to remove them to a new burial ground.

Bodies would be transferred to one of several locations.

Catholics were reburied in a mass grave in the cemetery east of St. John the Evangelist Catholic church in Shantytown (now Allouez Catholic Cemetery). It is believed that others were moved to what is now Baird Place at the corner of West Mason Street and South Webster Avenue. Some remains were left undisturbed — perhaps inadvertently.

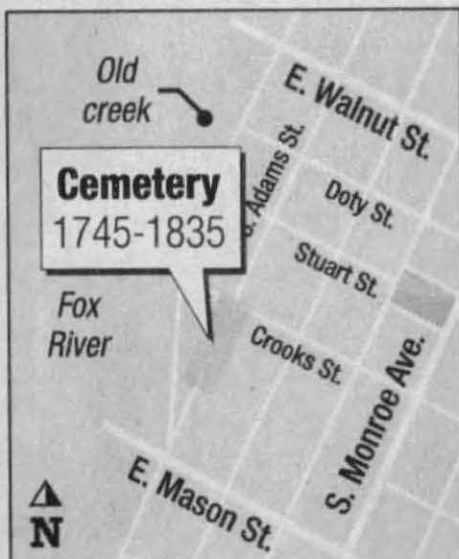
The mass grave at Allouez Catholic Cemetery is unmarked today. It is possible that a marker did exist at one time, but simply rotted away over the years.

As Dan Moran wrote in the Brown County Historical Society's newsletter, the site of the mass grave would remain a mystery until 1957.

That year, Monsignor Joseph A. Marx reported the discovery of a trench in the cemetery from 25 years earlier.

While digging an alley in the cemetery in 1932, a 20-foot-long trench was found. In it was a pit of decayed human remains.

Marx would specify the mass



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grave's location as east of the Ducharme and Cryan lots, lots 312-313 of Section AA North. It was Marx's assertion that this mass grave could be claimed as the final resting place for Augustine and Charles de Langlade.

As for the original burial site downtown, it would yield "discoveries" for the next 175 years.

By 1887, all visible reminders of the graveyard had definitively disappeared.

Physical remnants could, however, still be found beneath the ground.

During excavations along Adams Street for water mains that year, workers found human remains. The episode would be documented in a 1925 edition of the Green Bay Historical Bulletin: "A number of bodies were disinterred between Crooks and Chicago streets. They were reburied in the street, but beyond probable future disturbance. Many bodies still lie under the pavement and abutting lawns and gardens."

This would be prophetic, as throughout the years bodies continued to be found in the perimeter of the old burial ground.

As recently as April 2006, human remains were again uncovered during work along South Adams Street.

In accordance with Wisconsin statute, when found, human remains are carefully placed back where they were found. Procedures are in place for such discoveries.

As Janet Speth, former archaeologist at the Neville Public Museum of Brown County, explains: "If skeletal remains of any sort are found, the county sheriff should be called. The sheriff then notifies the Burial Preservation Office. All activities that might disturb the bones must be suspended until the BPO has a chance to make its determination. If they are archaeological, the determination of what to do will be based on how old the bones are, their cultural affiliation, what is happening at the site where the bones were found, and a number of other factors."

The fact that human remains still lay underground in downtown Green Bay today is well established.

What is not known is how long they will be left in place.

Barring the tearing up of private property and sections of South Adams Street, they likely will remain where they have for more than two and three-quarter centuries.